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TEACHING "MOBY DICK," A METHOD AND AN APPROACH.

BY- JOSEPHS, LOIS

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"MOBY DICK" IS SINGULARLY APPROPRIATE FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN ITS PHILOSOPHICAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, AND SOCIAL EMPHASIS. HOWEVER, TO GUIDE THE STUDENTS INTO THE THEMATIC INTRICACIES OF THE WORK, THE TEACHER MUST USE A CAREFULLY PLANNED, INDUCTIVE APPROACH THAT DEMANDS CLOSE TEXTUAL STUDY IN CLASS. ALTHOUGH EACH TEACHER SHOULD CONCENTRATE ON THE SECTIONS OF THE NOVEL THAT HE FINDS MOST EXCITING, THE FOLLOWING PASSAGES HAVE PROVED REWARDING IN DISCUSSIONS WITH STUDENTS--(1) THE FIRST CHAPTER, WHICH INTRODUCES ISHMAEL AND MELVILLE'S SATIRIC HUMOR, (2) ISHMAEL'S MEETING, FRIENDSHIP, AND CONVERSATION WITH QUEEQUEG, (3) THE FIRST GLIMPSE OF AHAB, (4) STARBUCK'S BATTLE WITH HIMSELF, (5) THE DESCRIPTIONS OF "SUNSET," "DUSK," "FIRST NIGHTWATCH," AND "MIDNIGHT, FORECASTLE," AND (6) THE CHAPTER, "WHITENESS OF THE WHALE." SUCH DETAILED ANALYSES OF SELECTED PASSAGES WILL ILLUSTRATE THE NOVEL'S RELEVANCE TO THE AMBIGUITIES OF MODERN LIFE AND PREPARE THE STUDENT FOR DEPTH STUDY OF THE WORK IN COLLEGE. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "ENGLISH JOURNAL," VOL. 56 (NOVEMBER 1967), 1115-19.) (LH)

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Teaching *Moby Dick*: A Method and an Approach

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Lois Josephs

Associate Professor of English
Carnegie Institute of Technology
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

BERNARD Shaw, fortunate in his success and practical enough to predict it, vowed that he would not allow his plays to be printed in high school anthologies, because "I lay my eternal curse on whomsoever shall now or at any time hereafter make schoolbooks of my works and make me hated as Shakespear is hated."[1] If Shaw had good reason to be wary of the misuse of his plays, Melville, who also knew and disliked the pedagogical methods of his day,[2] might have had even better reason to be apprehensive about the fate of *Moby Dick* in the high school classroom. Taught as a whole, it presents formidable problems that can make students hate Melville as they often hate Shakespeare. No wonder serious consideration as to the appropriateness of *Moby Dick* in the high school literature program continues to be a subject for disagreement.

Logically, *Moby Dick* should only be taught by one who responds to its greatness; but given a genuine appreciation on the part of the teacher, I see it as singularly appropriate for high school students in its philosophical, psychological, and social emphasis. In addition, *Moby Dick* has appeal, highly relevant to the ambiguities of our age. If the high school student is not consciously aware of the impact of existential thought—of Nietzsche, Heidegger, or Sartre, for example—he is, nevertheless, unconsciously a product of that impact. He is living in an age of relativity—Einstein's age in science—an age in which answers exist mainly in the search. He is, therefore, concerned and intrigued with Melville's unsettled questions of fate and human destiny, of the strange role of evil in that destiny, of man's struggle for self-awareness, and of the social implications involved in the satiric comparison of pagan and Christian culture. Can these issues be adequately revealed and understood in order for them to be perceptively and intelligently discussed? How is it possible for high school students to

[1] Hesketh Pearson, *George Bernard Shaw: His Life and Personality* (New York: Atheneum, 1963), p. 27.

[2] Unfortunately, the Socratic methods of Alcott and others like him were isolated exceptions.

arrive at a critically mature level of understanding necessary to an appreciation of *Moby Dick?*

THE ANSWER lies in a flexibility of approach which depends upon the work of literature; that is, given the conviction that *Moby Dick* is relevant and appropriate for high school students, a teacher must then make some decisions and concessions. I am not suggesting that concessions take the form of isolated snippets as the one in a widely-read anthology;[3] however, I do feel Edmund Fuller's abridgment[4] to be literarily valid for high school use. Even with this version, however, I would not expect most students to arrive at competence in discussing complex issues without a great deal of highly structured direction from the teacher, in other words without a carefully planned, inductive approach that demands close textual study in class. While students would be asked to read the entire text, they should not be responsible for interpreting, absorbing, or even remembering long philosophical sections or subtle nuances. Instead, the teacher might use occasional short, five-minute spot quizzes to check reading—quizzes limited to large, obvious questions that deal exclusively with narrative. Written quizzes such as these in addition to a few oral, pertinent, factual questions insure class understanding of the progress of the narrative. Only then may the teacher reach more deeply into thematic intricacies of *Moby Dick*.

Here, of course, one would hardly expect to cover everything, and decisions as to what particular sections of such a great novel are chosen for in-class, close, textual analysis seem largely a matter of individual preference. Certainly, a teacher will be most successful with those sections and passages that he finds most exciting—with the stipulated caution that he avoid belaboring and that he build toward the gradually increasing awareness of the literary and philosophic essence, thus to the significant and provocative ambiguities of *Moby Dick*. I can only suggest those sections that I have found most rewarding to discuss.

I find it profitable to read and discuss much of Chapter One, "Looming," in class. Important to the clarification of narrative method is the immediate grasp of the wanderer-narrator role of Ishmael. Half serious and half in jest, he describes the "damp, drizzly, November" in his soul; thus philosophically he involuntarily pauses before coffin warehouses. Feeling unaccountably depressed, he might, like Cato, commit suicide; instead, he goes to sea. Humorously again, but now more satirically, Ishmael explains why he goes to sea, not as a passenger, not as a cook, but as a simple sailor. What if he is ordered to "sweep down the decks?" Certainly, the "archangel Gabriel" will not think less of him. And then, more seriously and with universal intent, "Who ain't a slave? Tell me that." Ishmael continues, still in a satiric vein, humorously rationalizing, that he prefers being paid to paying, because "The act of paying is perhaps the most incompatible affliction that the two orchard thieves entailed upon us. . . ." But what compares with receiving money? Students are thoughtfully aroused by Ishmael's comment that "The urbane activity with which man receives money is really marvelous, considering that we so earnestly believe money to be the root of all earthly ills, and that on no account can a monied man enter heaven." Ironically, and only finally, does Ishmael state casually that his purse is empty.

STUDENTS are also amused by Ishmael's account of his place in the grand program of Providence—then

[3] *Adventures in American Literature*, Mercury Edition (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1952).

[4] Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, abridgment by Edmund Fuller in *Four American Novels* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1959).

thoughtful again as they reflect on the idea that Ishmael is cajoled "into the delusion that his choice is the result of "unbiased freewill and discriminating judgment." Close work with the text involves them with Melville's humor—his effective satire—but more, it explores, in depth, ideas they respond to but usually miss on their own: the humorously cynical way in which Melville views fits of depression; the common acceptance of personal freedom as seen beside Melville's comment, "Who ain't a slave?"; the sense or nonsense of human hypocrisy in dealing simultaneously with matters of money and matters of the soul; and finally, the expression of concern over the ambiguous juxtaposition of free will and fate. To enlarge upon this discussion, perhaps students may become even more involved by having the teacher call their attention to the last part of Chapter Two, "The Carpet-Bag":

> Yes, these eyes are windows, and this body of mine is the house. What a pity they didn't stop up the chinks and the crannies though, and thrust in a little lint here and there. But it's too late to make any improvements now. The universe is finished: the copestone is on, and the chips were carted off a million years ago.

Here, of course, the teacher also has unlimited opportunities to discuss literary style.

Moving on to a series of sections that are especially profitable, I like to emphasize those involving Ishmael's meeting, friendship, and conversations with Queequeg. After a discussion of one of Melville's delightful, perceptive asides that "people like to be private when they are sleeping," students are amused by details of the first view of Queequeg, then stimulated to a discussion of Ishmael's final realization, "Better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian." Significantly, Queequeg crawls under the bed in order to put on his boots in private, he is unperturbed by Ishmael's initial horror of the evils of cannibalism, he performs his religious rites in dignified silence, and he explains the logical and practical use, in his culture, of the lower orders of men as couches. His innocent statement of resignation that association with the civilized world "had unfitted him for ascending the pure and undefiled throne of thirty pagan Kings before him" is not simply a means to effective social criticism. Like the entire sequence of events, it raises provocative issues with students. How does the concept of evil depend upon the ideals of a particular culture? Is western man, in fact, as civilized as he believes? In what way does Melville see human values as less rigid—as more relative? In addition, attention may be called to Melville's narrative technique, more specifically to his use of Queequeg as an innocent but perceptive observer of the hypocrisies and failings of our culture.

NUMEROUS isolated sections of the novel are especially rewarding. There is the marvelously satiric and funny scene when Stubb has Fleece tell the sharks to "govern de shark in you" for "den you be angel: for all angel is not'ing more dan de shark well governed." What an amusing, provocative, and seeming oversimplification for class discussion. It is also interesting to call student attention to the first glimpse of Ahab when "reality outran apprehension," leading to a discussion of one seemingly universal aspect of human psychology; why does the imagination often evoke fears more intense though less defined than the fear of what is known? Then the scene of Starbuck's struggle with himself—his battle with fate, "blanched to a corpse's hue with despair" because of his inability to act—is the basis for a speculative discussion of human nature and the literary tech-

niques for building suspense. I also recommend the series of chapters that more obviously seek to establish the universal through the particular—the panoramic view of man and the whole world as reflected in the incidents and descriptions of "Sunset," "Dusk," "First Night-watch," and "Midnight, Forecastle." Finally, I suggest a close study of selected passages from "The Mat-maker" to reinforce the ambiguities of the fate-free will emphasis in the novel. What does Ishmael mean when he sees his life as a "Loom of Time," and himself as "a shuttle mechanically weaving away at the Fates"? Here, too, there is a surprisingly modern definition of time—a relative definition compatible with the contemporary scientific and philosophical concepts of relativity.

Students also respond strongly to a textual study of the chapter, "The Whiteness of the Whale," essentially a philosophical essay, revolving around the symbol, White. Here, Ishmael is now able to explain what the White Whale means to him—a subject that "as yet remains unsaid." It is "the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me," says Ishmael, admitting at the same time his awareness that white is also paradoxically a symbol of beauty and purity. He recognizes white to be "the emblem of many touching, noble things," listing a page of examples before insisting that, nevertheless, "there yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of panic to the soul than that redness which affrights in blood." Students are often fascinated by the variety of his examples: the milk-white fog, the albatross, ghosts, or the Albino who "so peculiarly repels and often shocks the eye, as that sometimes he is loathed by his own kith and kin!" Following the artistry of this masterfully organized chapter, students are led to an appreciation, if not to agreement, with what they gradually perceive. Horror exists not in the essence of whiteness but in "the visible absence of color." Here, man faces the terror of the unknowable. The natural philosopher can fool himself by seeing truth through color, that is through the artificial beauties of Nature which "paints like the harlot" to "cover nothing but the charnel-house within." But the man who faces the real—the white—has refused to wear colored glasses and therefore sees "the palsied universe," as he "gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him." To Ishmael, the Albino whale gradually becomes synonymous with evil. "Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?" he asks rhetorically, thus raising any number of open-ended questions that students are now prepared to discuss. What is the nature of evil, of reality, and of the interrelationships between the two according to Ishmael? To what extent is Ishmael a reliable narrator for Melville? When is Melville speaking? When is Ishmael, the character, speaking? When is it obvious that Ishmael has learned what Melville has had him learn through the manipulation of his experiences? These questions, of course, introduce a highly critical concept that can only be explored by close textual study. Hopefully, by now, students are reading with more care. Perhaps they have paused over sections which they can now personally relate to the issues of this chapter in class discussion.

OBVIOUSLY such issues provide opportunities for provocative discussions, and student perceptions should grow in approaching the end of the novel. Attempts to define the role of Fedallah, of Ahab, and of numerous other characters may evolve. I emphasize "attempts" because although students may now be better prepared to discuss these issues, like the critics, they cannot find absolute answers. Is Ahab a madman or is he symbolic of whatever Melville

means by Satan, whose ship "would not sink to hell till she had dragged a living part of heaven along with her . . ."? The sea rolls on "as it rolled five-thousand years ago," to raise the speculative implication that essentially life cannot change. Equally provocative is the question from Job in the Epilogue: Why does one survive the wreck? Does this lone survivor —a man—indicate some sign of hope in an ocean of human despair?

Admittedly, my suggestions cover only a small range of possibilities in teaching *Moby Dick*. Certainly, as I have suggested, I would not neglect the more obvious aspects of the novel: the story and the descriptions, for example. But I suspect that the philosophical issues cause high school students the most difficulty. I suggest, therefore, close textual study and discussion of specific sections. Students learn a great deal about how to read from such an approach, hopefully not an approach needed for most literary works chosen for the curriculum, rather for only a few.

I was once asked why I thought it wise for students to read works for which they are not completely prepared. I have suggested one answer. I would add that I see no reason to consider the rereading of great works in college as a problem in duplication. Rather, I view such rereading as a means of deepening insights into the intrinsic, universality of literary art. I go even further. The English major, for example, might approach *Moby Dick* with a thematic emphasis in high school, a chronological emphasis in an undergraduate course in American literature, a critical emphasis in an undergraduate Seminar in The American Renaissance, and an even more critical emphasis in a graduate Seminar on Melville. Perhaps the key to sequence in the English curriculum exists only partly in the appropriateness of the work, and, more significantly than we may suspect, in the method of approach. When I teach *Moby Dick* to high school students, I have "turned myself to behold wisdom, and madness and folly: for what can the man do that cometh after the King?" Then I remember the answer: "even that which hath been already done."[5] The great work of art demands repeated study for "Who is as the wise man? and who knoweth the interpretation of a thing?"[6]

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[5] Ecclesiastes II.12 in the King James Version.
[6] Ecclesiastes VIII.1 in the King James Version.